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Nuts-and-Bolts Diplom

THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER

By U. Alexis Johnson
with Jef Olivarius McAllister.
Prentice-Hall. $24.95.

By Robert Manning

URAL A. JOHNSON, born in the small town of Falun, Kan., was named by his mother for the mountain range she read about in a geography book. He altered his name to U. Alexis Johnson when he entered the United States Foreign Service in 1935 because one of his teachers suggested that it would "ring more impressively" in the corridors of the State Department. He went on to a career in his country's diplomatic service that included ambassadorships to Czechoslovakia, Thailand and Japan, more than one close brush with death in Saigon, and a seat at some of the world's most important negotiating tables. By the 1960's he had become, as Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the top career man in the Department, the man who knew how that air-conditioned rabbit warren in Foggy Bottom worked — and why occasionally it didn't. He was also the Department's liaison with the top levels of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon, a function that acquainted him with decisions and machinations known only to a few.

Some who worked with Mr. Johnson, as I did in the Kennedy years, remember him as a dedicated, hard-working public servant, stubborn, cautious, taciturn, a figure frequently seated behind the potted palm. Only grudgingly would he divulge even the time of day to an associate lacking a high security clearance.

Retirement after 42 years of devotion to duty has loosened Mr. Johnson's tongue. With the help of Jef McAllister, a former correspondent for Time magazine, he has composed in the form of memoirs a useful handbook of many State Department operations in the 1950's, 60's and 70's; a diligent salute to the too frequently maligned and too little understood Foreign Service, and some insights into how professional diplomats strive to do their job in our jungle on the Potomac.

Mr. Johnson lets loose some pent-up animadversions. He has little use for such political appointees to diplomatic posts as Chester Bowles or John Kenneth Galbraith. He finds George Kennan "an unusually subtle and profound thinker . . . [but] an indifferent diplomat." Like so many career diplomats, he holds mainly derogatory views of the press — it is a nuisance. He resents Congressional meddling in foreign affairs. When he served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs under President Nixon he was appalled by Henry Kissinger, whom he portrays here as a moral cripple lusting for power.

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For all this unaccustomed loquacity, when it comes to substance the author is the same old U. Alexis Johnson. No secrets or titillating revelations are deliberately offered in these pages. In his own telling he comes across not as an architect of foreign policy but a mechanic; a valuable man to have had around because he knew how to fit the nuts to the bolts and keep the engine room running while those on the upper decks sipped the good wine, charted the course and got the headlines. He was, he says with inordinate frequency, widely regarded as a man who could "get things done." Because of that talent he was chosen by a succession of Presidents and Secretaries of State for assignments of considerable complexity. He served for three trying years as Eisenhower's negotiator with the Chinese Communists, sat in the small executive committee that served Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis and spent four years under Nixon as a negotiator with the Russians on limiting strategic arms.

There is one interlude in "The Right Hand of Power" that is surprising, even disturbing. Mr. Johnson tells of his role high up in Washington's sectlike intelligence community as the State Department's member of several secret groups that debated and passed on major intelligence initiatives, including covert activities against foreign governments or persons. One of those bodies was the so-called Special Group (Augmented), set up in 1961 because President Kennedy and his brother Robert were determined to topple Fidel Castro from power in Cuba. The program for achieving that objective was called Operation Mongoose. "The Special Group (Augmented) never discussed assassinating Castro," Mr. Johnson writes, "and I never had knowledge of any plan for doing so." Three pages later he says, "All programs originated by C.I.A. or proposed by other agencies were carefully staffed and considered by the Committee." How does one account for these statements from such a high-ranking official in the light of the disclosures from hearings before Senator Frank Church's Select Committee on Intelligence and other inquiries into the Government's efforts to rid this planet of Fidel Castro? What do they betray about communication within the high levels of government?

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